

When the Clock is Ticking

Designing a College Reading Readiness Course

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Looking back on the course we designed, we recognize that the catalyst to success was the commitment to incorporating five course components: substantial instructional minutes, authentic academic reading material, various instructional groupings, instruction on vocabulary and background knowledge, and modeling of college expectations. Alone, each component was effective; together, they were powerful. Here is a look at these five critical components.

SUBSTANTIAL INSTRUCTIONAL MINUTES

A dramatic increase in time spent on reading was required for students to make unprecedented growth and to develop college-reading skills. Each class would be twice as long as our normal 50-minute class period. Students would commit to a course that met Monday through Friday for 100-minute blocks. Further, the class would not follow regular quarter or nine-week scheduling; it would continue for a solid year.

AUTHENTIC ACADEMIC READING MATERIAL

Staff focused on academic reading, giving students strategies to move beyond learning to read and equipping them to begin reading to learn. After much research, the text we chose was *Reading for Life* by Corinne Fennessy, a college developmental text for students at a sixth to ninth grade reading level. *Reading for Life* was chosen because each chapter engages students with stories and vocabulary around different careers, and this matched our transition program's focus. To enhance career knowledge and motivate student interest, the class took quarterly field trips to a variety of area businesses, met with human relations personnel, and had guest speakers come to talk about the careers we were reading about in class.

Further, each chapter focused on developing a different reading skill. These skills, the backbone of our instruction, included identifying the main idea, stated and implied; understanding supporting details; and recognizing patterns of

organization. They also included making inferences, drawing conclusions, developing vocabulary, and thinking critically.

Our text was paired with Pearson's MyReadingLab™, an on-line program specifically created for the developmental reader at the college level that delivers instruction beginning at the fourth grade level. This on-line program uses the Lexile system to measure text difficulty and to analyze students' reading levels as the levels change over time. Our students began, on average, at the 600 Lexile level. We predicted that students would need to raise their scores to between the 1,000-1,100 Lexile level to get into a developmental college-level reading course.

VARIOUS INSTRUCTIONAL GROUPINGS

We chose a hybrid model of instruction that included group instruction, small group work, and individual practice. We introduced specific reading skills or modeled effective reading strategies to the students in a large group. Students worked in small groups to process their learning, to practice reading

skills, and to work on certain skills necessary in postsecondary training and employment, such as collaborating with each other to find answers and working within time limits. They worked individually when they pulled up MyReadingLab and performed exercises and did diagnostic tests that measured individual growth.

"I really liked working together," noted one student, looking back. "The whole class helped each other. Learning how to work in a

group, discuss stories, and answer questions helped me understand my reading better."

INSTRUCTION ON VOCABULARY AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Due to the English language difficulties experienced by our students, vocabulary instruction was expanded. In addition to the vocabulary activities in the book, we worked on extending background knowledge before each story was read. Although it was time consuming, the addition of teaching and discussing each story's background paid off as students read. Having





explicit background knowledge not only increased comprehension but equipped students with the knowledge they needed to discuss story concepts using critical thinking skills. As one of our teachers remarked, “Sometimes you just have to stop what you’re doing and explain who Paul Bunyan is, even if you live in Minnesota!”

Vocabulary development focused not only on definitions but on learning multiple meanings of words in context. Students were encouraged to look up words online that they did not know in the MyReadingLab passages. The instructional team, including the interpreter, teacher, and educational assistant, worked together to promote vocabulary. Staff signed, fingerspelled, and wrote vocabulary words on the board during instruction. In addition, students were expected to hold themselves accountable for increasing their own vocabulary—not only for a good grade but for their own future success in college and the workplace.

MODELING OF COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS

Students were instilled with a lofty goal—to increase reading levels by more than one grade. The primary learning activity was simple: students were expected to read. On the first day of class, the teacher displayed a paragraph on the SMART Board and asked the students to read it. To her amazement, all eyes turned instantly to the interpreter. The students were waiting for the interpreter to sign the paragraph to them!

This was the pivotal moment when we realized that our students had become passive. We knew that the first college-level expectation we would instill in them would be that of active learning. After so many years of frustration, they had

stopped asking questions; not understanding was their norm. We cultivated a classroom in which students felt comfortable asking questions and taking an active role in their learning. We increasingly and incrementally raised the level of the material and classroom expectations. We wanted our students to realize their reading growth was ultimately under their control.

We took time to talk about and demonstrate other skills—how to organize a notebook, how to take notes from the textbook, how to create a planner to keep track of assignments. We also worked on teamwork and test-taking skills. All of this took time away from reading, but these critical skills are necessary for students wanting to succeed in the postsecondary environment.

VECTOR started out with a goal—to assist our students in becoming better readers. All of the research, teaming, and hard work paid off when these five components helped us establish literacy as the foundation of academic achievement, and our students excelled amid high expectations.

Reference

Fennessy, C. (2010). *Reading for life*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Longman, Inc.

Resource

Pearson’s MyReadingLab™, www.pearsonmylabandmastering.com/northamerica/myreadinglab